

## Why the Nzangnyu Call the Orange the Fruit that makes babies

An Assam Rengma (Nzang Terüpvunyu) folk tale<sup>1</sup>

Retold by Rupak Debnath<sup>2</sup>

There was a man who had everything but no children. His wife could not conceive, and although he did not blame her, he complained to his friends about how unfortunate he was. They consoled him by saying, ‘Your wife is not getting any younger, and you know it’. One of them said to him one day, *Anyonyugi arhang gwa swa. Ngne lolo hü da gwa ma.* ‘My uncle’s daughter is young and beautiful. You could marry her.’ The man loved his wife but did not want to die childless. He listened to his friend and brought home a much younger woman one fine day. His first wife was jealous of her and desperately wanted the young woman to have a barren womb. Days turned into months, months turned into years, and the years passed slowly. But nothing happened that could make the man truly happy. Sadly, the young wife also failed to give her husband a child.

When all hope seemed lost, a villager accompanying him to work on the swiddens told him about a *kendunyu*, a man with supernatural powers. The strange man lived in a village that could be reached by going up and down a hill, through a forest, across a *rinyu* (stream), and then up another hill. ‘Let me go to the *kendunyu*. Maybe he can make the women at home fertile with magic or something.’ And he decided to take a day off. He woke up early as usual, around *terü kekhang kho*, when the rooster crowed to greet the dawn and took his morning meal. Then he tied the *jenkürang* (dao belt) around his waist, armed himself with the *myu* (spear), and put on the *thügwenbvü* (bear hair wig). He also carried rice measuring two baskets and a rooster. The path he had to take to go to the *kendunyu*’s village zigzagged through a dense forest, and wild animals roamed in the open. He did not know if the villagers would be friends or enemies.

Just before entering the forest, he suddenly heard *Ngo*, the laughing thrush, on his right, and he knew it would be a lucky day for him. All was quiet except for the occasional chirping of birds and the soft rustle of leaves. No wild animal, neither *Temen*, the tiger, nor *Thügwen*, the bear, came that day to challenge a human presence in the forest. He was happy that things had gone well so far.

Around *ho kepeng kho*, an hour before noon, he reached the village after going up and down a hill, through a forest, across a small stream and then up another hill. He quickly found the *kendunyu*’s humble abode, well known throughout the village. When he met the *kendunyu*, who was older than any man he had seen walking but had eyes that shone like pure silver, he greeted him saying, *Kedasheng.* ‘Greetings to you.’ He offered the old man the rice and the rooster he had carried as gifts. When the *kendunyu* asked, ‘What are you looking for in me?’ the man told him everything he had come to say. After listening to him, the *kendunyu* thought for a moment. Then he asked the man to go to the small orchard further from the house. There he would find a *honthira ben*, an orange tree. *Honthirashah khi lo o shengong ngnyünyu pi shi ta.* ‘Take the orange you picked to give to your wives.’ And he added: ‘They will bring forth sons before three seasons have passed.’

The man eagerly picked an orange and began his journey home. He found a fairly cool place under a tree near the small stream and sat down to eat the leaf-wrapped lunch he had brought. After eating and drinking water from the stream, he started walking. He walked briskly and returned home at *terü kekü kho*, just as the hens slowly returned to their roosts. His women were eager for news and were at the door when he entered.

He gave the orange to his first wife and said to her, *Nghi kenjin lo ta.* ‘Share it between you two.’ She nodded in agreement but ate everything and did not give a single carpel to the young woman. The second wife was sad when the first wife said, *Honthira le nnyet swa ma, aye anang o aketji lo ngpi hüma.* ‘The orange was very sweet, but I forgot to give you half of it.’ But who can change what fate has in store for us? Finding the orange peels on the ground, she picked and ate them and quickly conceived a child. The first wife also conceived a child but after a few days. Two sons were born, one each to a woman, and the man was thrilled to see that both babies looked strong and healthy.

Hearing what had happened, the villagers then named the fruit that produced the miracle *nyukenthügirashah* – ‘the fruit that makes babies’.

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1. Kenino Nyenthang of NKhenari, Assam, provided the outline of this story when asked if the Rengma Nagas had a term for ‘orange’ other than the Assamese word *sumthira* /xum.thi.ra/, which they currently use and pronounce as /hon.thi.ra/. The details needed to tell this story come from the answers given by David Rengma of Diphu, Assam, when asked about Rengma customs and behaviour, particularly their traditional ways of telling stories.

2. The author is a linguist, anthropologist, and folklorist. He has written extensively on the languages, cultures, and folk tales of many ethnic communities in Northeast India. Currently, he is an independent researcher.